

Westminster through the looking glass: Parliament back to front post Brexit



The historic Commons debate showed how everything in Parliament is suddenly back to front: the only certainty is that the Government's authority is unchallenged

As Kenneth Clarke evoked the idea of Alice in Wonderland during the historic debate on Britain's withdrawal from the European Union (EU) at the end of last month, he did so with the intention of mocking the surreal fantasy world imagined by those who believe that the country's future course will be an easy one. It was a powerful metaphor in an important speech, which will certainly resound for years longer than any others made from either of the front benches of the House of Commons.

But I think Mr Clarke picked the wrong book. The state of British politics today is more like the world Alice found in the Lewis Carroll sequel when she climbed on to the mantelpiece and slipped dreamily "through the looking glass".

Everything now is back to front: here is a former Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer, a man who has sat on one front bench or the other for nearly 40 years, rebelling against his own government. Nothing looks quite like it should: there is Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party, someone who has serially ignored his party whip more than 400 times in a lifetime of rebellious disregard for authority, imposing a three-line whip on his MPs to try to force them, the Opposition, to back the Tory government in contravention of Labour policy and their personal views.

Of course, no one says what they really mean: some of the Labour whips, the people specifically appointed to ensure discipline, to see that MPs vote as they are told, then do exactly the opposite themselves, without resigning and with little rebuke. And all the time everyone talks in endless riddles: "Brexit means Brexit!" cries the Prime Minister in exactly the tone the White Queen would adopt before embarking upon yet another complicated sum of subtraction.

All this while in the background there whirls ever faster a cast of fantastical minor characters – Nicola Sturgeon, Nigel Farage, Diane Abbott, the Speaker of the House of Commons – all revolving to a chorus of the Scottish Nationalists humming Beethoven's Ode to Joy, as parliamentary clerks throw their horsehair wigs into the air and a bunch of parliamentary nonentities who were elected to Westminster five minutes ago take their bows as they pirouette into line for an election to the leadership of the Labour Party that everyone says isn't happening.

“What dreadful nonsense we are talking!” exclaims Alice in exasperation, and eventually she sighs and gives up arguing with the Red Queen about what is left when you take a bone from a dog and whether you can divide a loaf by a knife and what is the French for fiddle-de-dee. That is how it feels to me today. The possibility of making any sense out of it is limited, but here goes.

All the argument about the Brexit Bill is irrelevant. The legislation will go through the House of Lords probably by the end of the first week in March. There will be much tumult and shouting, and there may be amendments, which would lead to some parliamentary ping-pong. But the legislation will be passed. It is the ensuing two years of negotiating what happens next that will be bitter and brutal for Britain – and which will provide the greatest threat to Theresa May as Prime Minister.

Does anyone seriously suppose that the other member states of the EU will be disposed to assist Britain to their own disadvantage? Of course they won't, and elections in other European states, not least France and Germany, will make for more difficulties, not fewer. The Conservative Government may appear a trifle smug at present, unfettered as it is by any meaningful political opposition in Parliament, but when the implications of the United Kingdom's future independence are properly understood the public mood could easily swing against it.

That does not mean that with one glad cry the electorate will recognise that Corbyn, or whomsoever has by then been whistled up from a focus group popularity poll to replace him, has been right all along. Rebecca Long-Bailey, Angela Rayner and Clive Lewis are all unknown to the greater public, and scarcely known at Westminster as they were all first elected as Labour MPs less than two years ago.

But whoever does the thinking in the Corbyn entourage has correctly identified the fact that with a minus-22 approval rating in the opinion polls, their man is not exactly tuning in to the British people. The search is therefore on for a younger model lefty who might be required to step in and person the party's barricades. Long-Bailey is favoured by the Corbyn crowd, while Lewis is increasingly discussed as the left-winger most likely to be the person to start repairing the damage of recent years.

Yet this ignores the impact of that damage. The Labour Party has betrayed its political purpose, a process most clearly perceived during Tony Blair's government (although it arguably began before then).

That betrayal has already wiped out the Labour vote in Scotland and will probably lose the party both of the by-elections taking place this coming Thursday. It will be a remarkable triumph for Mrs May if the Conservative candidate wins Copeland from the official opposition party – a feat not achieved for more than 30 years – and for Ukip's new leader, Paul Nuttall, if he becomes the party's second MP in Stoke-on-Trent Central. The point, however, is that both seats will have been lost by Labour's failure,

not won by the victorious new incumbents. The idea of a revival from the Liberal Democrats need not trouble us here.

In the meantime, we have the dangerous reality of a government whose authority is unchallenged in Parliament. The only worthwhile opposition on display has been that from Lord (Alf) Dubs, marching in his eighties in protest at the Home Office U-turn on unaccompanied children seeking refuge from terror. Oh and perhaps Ken Clarke, too.

As Lewis Carroll put it: “Of all the strange things that Alice saw in her journey through the Looking Glass, this was the one that she always remembered most clearly.”

Julia Langdon is a political journalist, writer and broadcaster.

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